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PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Some Replies to a Questionnaire

ARE nurses commercial? Are they selfish materialists? Is the spirit of service that animated our pioneer women wholly lost? These and similar questions have confronted the older women of the profession so persistently that the whole question of Professional Ethics was made a matter of major importance at the Annual Conference of the Alumnae of the Department of Nursing and Health of Teachers College.

In preparation for the event a questionnaire was sent out and the outstanding points in the answers of sixteen thoughtful persons who are in touch with many phases of nursing are here briefly summarized. Repeated emphasis on the importance of example rather than precept indicates clearly the seriousness of the task assumed by those who teach. Concessions made to fill schools by bringing in immature and poorly prepared students are indicated as responsible for many of our difficulties with both students and graduates, inasmuch as we are now dealing, even in schools with relatively high educational requirements, with unformed characters which need more careful guidance than some of the schools have been prepared to give. It is not reasonable to expect just the same type of achievement from these nurses as was the rule when students entered training at a more mature age and after their ideals, based on the bed-rock of formed character, were fully developed.

Confidence in the youth of today when given suitable opportunity for growth and self-expression, and a belief in the growing social consciousness of nurses, are the keynotes of the more constructive replies received. The thought provoking questions follow:

I. *What are our greatest problems of personal and professional conduct as you see them today?*

The tendency towards materialism, to use nursing as a means to a selfish end, and failure to see the larger ends of humanitarianism and of true religion, were offered by a large number. Many of the writers believe these tendencies are due to the concessions made in order to fill our schools—concessions that have permitted the acceptance of relatively large numbers of immature and, all too frequently, poorly prepared students. A few believe these tendencies to be evidence of a changing social order.

II. *Are the older standards of ethics a sufficient guide in helping us to meet these problems? Are they inadequate or out of date?*

Several writers stressed the importance of providing for self-

development and for eliminating the military idea of training with its tendency to develop subserviency. The importance of discriminating between ethics and etiquette was also stressed. The director of a great school answered most inspiringly as follows: "The old standard is the true one. All ethics is based on the Sermon on the Mount, but must be taught through a psychological approach adapted to the understanding of the young women of today."

III. *Among the nurses in your group or community, what indications do you find of a better social attitude and higher ethical conduct? What indications of a lower standard? To what do you attribute these tendencies mainly?*

An expanding social consciousness is demonstrated in many ways—particularly by the zeal with which nurses are constantly opening up new fields, by their success in interesting ever-widening groups of people in nursing, and by the willingness of relatively large groups to enter the comparatively poorly paid field of public health. (b) Lower standards are shown by a tendency to commercialism—a situation made rather worse, instead of better, by the attacks of such medical men as believe nurses are merely vassals or handmaidens instead of helpmates to physicians. (c) The hospitals are to blame, in some instances, for lower standards. It is inevitable that when nurses are trained under a system requiring a maximum of work and giving a minimum of education and consideration to pupils, that they should tend, also to demand much and give little. One writer, with perhaps the same thought in mind, believes that the ethics of nurses are neither better nor worse than the ethics of those about them.

IV. *In what respect, if any, do you find the younger generation differ from the women of ten or twenty years ago? What changes are required in dealing with them?*

A few answers indicate the belief that the students in schools which make a careful selection are fundamentally as altruistic as the women of pioneer days. Many believe that present day irresponsibility is due to actual lack of home training. Practically all are agreed that the youth of the student of today calls for an adjustment in our schools which recognizes the fact that we are now dealing with developing, rather than fully developed personalities, and it behooves us to plan carefully in order that the influence of the school may be wholly constructive. The whole trend of the times is towards democracy and away from autocracy and the military idea of discipline is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. It is significant that one writer only expresses a belief in the necessity for maintaining the older type of discipline; the others all recognize the necessity for helping the students of today to develop poise, and a high ethical and

social sense, together with independence and self-expression. Some answers indicate that the economic independence of the young woman of today has tended to make her morally, spiritually and intellectually independent as well.

V. *In your own professional training and experience, what influences helped most in holding you and your associates to a high standard of ethical conduct and in making you a socially effective and useful person?*

(b) *What influences have tended to weaken and narrow you?*

(a) The answers to this question are exceedingly illuminating as in almost every instance the example of good women and fine nurses, super-imposed upon fine ideals in the home, are shown to have been dominating factors. Here, too, the effects of religious teaching and beliefs are shown to have been a definite influence as was the case of those writers in whose home training the Golden Rule stood out as a guiding star. Inherent qualities of character and love of the profession are also enumerated several times.

(b) The discussion of retarding influences is especially thought provoking. The crushing atmosphere of repression under the military system is frequently referred to and the failure of schools to provide sufficient leisure and suitable means of enjoying it, such as provision for outside contacts, is referred to over and over again. Others affirm that they have been retarded by lack of a definite goal, by the excessive physical demands of the hospitals, and by inadequate training.

VI. *What methods have you found most effective in bringing about a wholesome professional morale in groups of students or graduate nurses in helping them to meet ethical and social problems in a fine way?*

Here the majority find that the best results are secured by frank discussions, an impartial distribution of praise and blame, by adopting an honor system, or some system of self-government. Here again the force of example is found to be a dominating influence; and a study of the lives of great nurses, as well as the influence of the outstanding women in their own groups is found to be helpful. The study of the history of nursing in preliminary and even in pre-nursing courses was frequently recommended.

What are your greatest difficulties?

These are found to be due in large measure to "lack of early ethical training and consequent inability to think quickly toward a correct decision" and to a narrow view of our profession with a lack of real interest in people, together with an undue emphasis on personal rights. Many writers acknowledge a serious difficulty in finding

methods of interesting their groups, either graduate or student, in the larger social opportunities and obligations of the profession. Says one writer:

In making a careful study of the work and recreation of the young people of today, one would decide that what we really need to do is to teach the people how to play properly and how to spend the free time belonging to themselves, rather than to teach them how to work and to serve. This statement is made with the fullest optimism, although I realize it does not sound so. I have a great abiding faith in the young woman of today. I find she rises to meet every important occasion, that her judgments are good and her action is prompt. It is the daily life, not the great occasion that needs to be guided in some way. She has not learned and is not willing to learn the great lesson, that we measure up to the greatest opportunities of one's work only in so far as we are willing to accept its obligations, and after we have met its obligations, to continue investing our time, interest and effort in it. *It is this surplus investment that brings the greatest result.*

VII. *What plan would you suggest for arousing the effort and interest of nurses generally in strengthening our ethical standards and in making them more widely effective?*

The answers to this question are so diverse as to render a real summary impossible, but again an emphasis on the force of example and the value of biographical material is emphasized and one writer begs that the religious feeling which the student brings to the school be nurtured.

Several answers stress the importance of an appreciation of the psychology of the younger women who have the courage and ability to live up to the ideals expected, but not arbitrarily demanded of them, and one states plainly that only by this means can we hope to obtain large numbers of desirable students and thus "improve the stock." One writer asks if perhaps a bonus and demerit system is not the answer to the graduate problem and pertinently asks if the enthusiastic, optimistic and conscientious worker should not be paid more than the indifferent, grouchy nurse who does her work only for the sake of the salary?

The influence of well organized alumnae associations is felt to be of prime importance by a number of writers, because here the real meaning of a profession can be kept before graduate nurses. One Alumnae Association has found a "Grievance Committee" an effective agent in improving conditions. Another believes that more rigid enforcement of rules and regulations regarding the dismissal of nurses from directories and organizations would arouse effort to maintain higher ethical standards. We quote in full the recommendations of a writer who reveals an unusual grasp of the whole situation:

Professional registries open to graduates, attendants, and practical nurses (whose capability, personality, etc., have been investigated by registry). This as a means of making nurses feel that the whole nursing situation is "up to them," i. e., under their control.

A study of the results of student government or class organization in schools where it has been tested under favorable conditions and the opinion of principals of nursing schools as to the ethical standards developed by these systems would be interesting.

For students—more lectures and education on current topics, other lines of education, etc. Membership in and attendance on student volunteer organizations and conventions. Encourage visits to other nursing schools and combined activities of schools.

For graduates—greater interest in women's organizations, such as civic and city clubs, as well as nursing organizations. Encourage nurses in special lines of work to join other organizations in different fields of their type of work. For example, nurse teachers would probably benefit by joining the National Educational Association.

Alumnae associations should be encouraged to a closer connection with their training schools in an endeavor to help the schools. They should also send more of the younger graduates to nurses' conventions.

More education of Training School Committees with attendance of chairman of such committees at conventions if possible.

When the educational problem has been solved by fewer and better schools, combined and central schools, combined preliminary courses, combined instructors, etc., the standard of professional ethics will adjust itself to a great extent.

PAID VISITING NURSE SERVICE

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IN THE early days of visiting nursing associations their work lay wholly among the poor, and the object and aim of organization was to furnish skilled nursing care in their own homes for those unable to pay for such service. Stress was laid upon the fact that this was a charitable work, and the nurses of those days were not allowed to receive payment from their patients.

As time went on, however, there arose the problem of the families who needed and desired just the service that the visiting nurse was able to give, but who were unwilling to accept charity. To meet this situation a new policy was adopted and the work placed on a different basis.

Patients able to pay wholly or in part for nursing service were expected to do so according to their ability. Patients too poor to pay anything were made to feel that the same service was extended to them in exactly the same spirit as before; and that they would always